



Information Brief

After-School Programs

A large number of today's students are home alone in the hours after school. According to "Kids Count 2000," based on 1998 data, 77 percent of Iowa's children under age six and 65 percent of those between the ages of six and twelve live in households with working parents. These percentages are 10 percent greater than the national percentage. At the same time, the Federal Bureau of Investigation identifies the hours between 3 - 6:00 p.m. as the times when youngsters are at greatest risk of committing or being victims of violent acts. In the past, primarily community-based organizations have carried out after-school programming. Today, there is a trend toward school-based programs that are proving to be very effective in improving students' academic performance and engagement in problem behaviors.

CRITICAL ELEMENTS ADDRESSED:

- *The school has a variety of programs and services intended to prevent or intervene early with students' social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties.*
 - *Indicator: A wide range of developmentally appropriate, structured options is designed to prevent the onset of social, emotional, intellectual, and/or behavioral difficulties.*
 - *Essential Practice: After-school programs provide students with opportunities from school and community for involvement in a variety of areas; including, but not limited to, YMCA/YWCA, interest clubs, teams, hobbies, drama, music and sports.*

INTRODUCTION

The period of time between the end of the school day and the end of the workday is the most vulnerable time for our children and youth. These are the hours that they are more likely to engage in at-risk behavior and are most susceptible to the dangers that exist in neighborhoods and communities. In the hours between 3 - 6:00 p.m., violent juvenile crime soars (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). Unsupervised youth are more likely to:

- commit or become victims of violent crime;
- be in or cause a car crash;
- be killed as a result of household or other accidents;
- use cigarettes or experiment with illegal drugs;
- engage in sexual intercourse, resulting in unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (Foundation Consortium, 2000).

Today, between eight and 15 million children return to empty homes after school. When the school bell rings, the anxiety of parents begins. They worry about whether their children are safe and whether they are vulnerable to drugs and crime.

There is a chronic shortage of after-school programs available to serve children. Although 74 percent of elementary and middle school parents say that they would be willing to pay for such a program, only 31 percent of primary school parents and 30 percent of secondary parents report that their children actually

attend an after-school program at school (U.S. Department of Education, June 1998). In response to this pressing concern, many communities have created after-school programs to keep children and youth out of trouble and engaged in activities that help them learn (U.S. Department of Education, June 1998).

"It's just common sense that if we don't provide young people with some kind of sanctuary — I call them 'safe places' — and give kids something constructive to do once the last bell rings, they are going to be easy marks for drug dealers, gang recruiters and other predators."

- General Colin L. Powell

While past research has focused on how children spend their time after school and what level of supervision is provided, current research has begun to examine the various types of after-school activities and their effects on the cognitive and emotional development of children. Researchers have identified three major functions of after-school programs: 1) providing supervision, 2) offering enriching experiences and positive social interaction, and 3) improving academic achievement (Olatokunbo S. Fashola, In press).

Research shows that after-school programs improve academic performance and help children and youth avoid high-risk and dangerous situations that can occur during unsupervised time. In addition, they have been catalysts for change that has resulted in stronger partnerships among communities, city and county governments and schools (Foundation Consortium, 2000).

THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS AFTER SCHOOL

Traditionally community agencies have operated after-school programs. Schools started providing these programs only recently. Overwhelmingly (93 percent), Americans favor providing school-based after-school programs in their own communities (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). The 21st Century Community Learning Centers grants from the U.S. Department of Education enable school districts to fund public schools as community education centers for keeping children safe during after-school hours. These grants funded more than 3600 school sites.

CREATING QUALITY AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS

The creation of successful after-school programs differs from district to district. By responding to the needs of each individual community, the after-school program grows successful independently. Community efforts result in programs that meet the needs of the school-aged children when school is not in session. Strong leadership and effective management set the goals of the after-school program and carry them forward. Quality programs hire skilled and qualified staff, provide them with ongoing professional development, and keep adult-to-child ratios low and group sizes manageable (U.S. Department of Education, June 1998).

Positive Youth Development for Successful Youth
Although after-school programs provide safe havens for students, they can also provide extended learning opportunities that contribute significantly to the positive development of youth. Supports and opportunities provided in many after-school programs include:

- connecting youth to principled and caring adults
- nurturing young people's skills and capacities, including social skills, vocational interests and civic responsibility
- protecting youth from violence and other dangerous or negative influences
- creating peer groups that exert positive influence on each other
- providing opportunities for children and youth to contribute to their community and society
- enriching young people's academic performance and educational commitment

(America's Promise, Alliance for Youth, March 2001).

LEARN MORE ABOUT IT:

- **Web sites:**
 - National Governors Association Center for Best Practices: <http://www.nga.org/CBP/Activities/Extralearning.asp>
 - Foundation Consortium: <http://www.foundationconsortium.org/pdf/afterschool/programs.doc>
 - U.S. Department of Education: <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/SafeandSmart/intro.html>
- **In this Handbook:** See "Success4 Critical Elements," and other articles in this section on Frameworks, Youth Development, Youth Leadership/Youth Empowerment, and Service-Learning.

Taking a Stand for Academic Achievement

Linking after-school programs with children's learning experiences in the classroom improves academic achievement. However, in a 1994 Harris poll, more than one-half of teachers polled singled out "children who are left on their own after school" as the primary explanation for students' difficulties in class (U.S. Department of Education, June 1998). Establishing a link between school-day teachers and after-school personnel keeps the line of communication open for expanded learning opportunities. Research by Dr. Reginald Clark demonstrates that how students use their time in school and out of school is an important predictor of their academic success. Clark found that low-achieving students spend the majority of their non-school hours in activities that have little benefit to them during their in-school time. On the other hand, high-achieving students participate in more activities that reinforce the skills and knowledge learned in school (Foundation Consortium, 2000). After-school programs provide the opportunity for this coordinated effort.

Involving Parents and Community

Successful after-school programs involve parents and the community at large to add depth and direction to the program. While keeping parents informed of the activities available to their children, after-school program leaders can offer parents opportunities for volunteer involvement. Positive relationships with the community bring to the after school program additional volunteers, supporting networks with community-based and youth-serving organizations, expertise in management and youth development, and needed resources and funding. (U.S. Department of Education, June 1998).

SUMMARY

For many children across America, after-school programs provide a structured, safe, supervised environment for learning, fun, and friendship with adults and peers alike. When the collaboration of schools and communities offer after-school programs, they engage young people in positive activities that build a stronger and healthier community.

Quality after-school programs can meet family needs by providing responsible adult supervision of children during non-school hours. By offering young people rewarding, challenging, and age-appropriate activities in a safe, structured, and positive environment, after-school programs help prevent juvenile delinquency and insulate children from injury and violent victimization. After-school programs give children and teenagers positive reasons to say "yes."